

Characters

Dennis Eady: The son of Michael Eady, an ambitious Irish grocer. Dennis has a reputation for applying the same techniques his father used so successfully in business in pursuit of the young women of Starkfield.

Ethan Frome: Ethan Frome is twenty-eight years old and physically impressive at the time the events in the novel take place. A series of family crises put a premature end to his engineering studies and force him into agriculture, for which he has no inclination, and now he must also care for Zeena, his cranky, hypochondriacal wife of seven years. Ethan's brief studies made him "aware of the huge cloudy meanings behind the daily face of things," and because he is "by nature grave and inarticulate," he is "warmed to the marrow by friendly human intercourse." He cannot expect this from Zeena, who basically stopped speaking a year into their marriage. So when Mattie Silver comes to live with the Fromes as a companion to Zeena, Ethan takes to her immediately. "Always more sensitive than the people about him to the appeal of natural beauty," Ethan delights in showing Mattie the stars in the sky and rock formations, and in accompanying her to and from her social outings. He is "never gay but in her presence." His generosity is evident in his taking time from his own chores to cover for her inadequate housekeeping by creeping down late on Saturday nights to scrub the kitchen floor.

Though he has longed despairingly for years for change and freedom, his sole desire now is to have things remain the way they are, with Mattie near him. In fact, as Kenneth Bernard wrote, "Throughout the book, Frome recognizes his futility and accepts it rather than trying to fight his way out of it." An example of this kind of acceptance is Ethan's penchant for daydreaming about Mattie. When Zeena's overnight trip to the doctor leaves Ethan and Mattie alone for an evening, instead of trying to touch her, he "set his imagination adrift on the fiction that they had always spent their evenings thus and would always go on doing so." The next morning, he is "glad that he had done nothing to trouble the sweetness of the picture." Although Ethan's first reaction to Zeena's sudden decision to send Mattie away is that he is "too young, too strong, too full of the sap of living, to submit so easily to the destruction of his hopes," he cannot bring himself to lie to the Hales to get the money he would need to run away with Mattie. Many critics see Ethan as a weak and negative person. At the end of the novel, it is Mattie who suggests the suicide pact. Blake Nevius maintains that Wharton intended "to invest her rather unpromising human material with a tragic dignity," but according to Bernard "his character never changes. Both before and after the accident he is the same." "No hero of fantastic legend," wrote *The Nation* on publication of the novel, "was ever more literally hag-ridden than was Ethan Frome."

Zenobia Frome: Zenobia (Zeena) is Ethan Frome's unhappy, malady-plagued wife. She is thirty-five at the time the events of the novel take place, and "already an old woman." Her hair is gray, her clothing is described as "slatternly," and she makes a "familiar gesture of adjusting her false teeth" before eating. Zeena first came to the Frome farmhouse to help Ethan nurse his ailing, deranged mother, and he was "shamed and dazzled" by her efficiency. The couple's plan on marrying was to sell the farm and sawmill and to move to a large town. But although Zeena had no desire to live on an isolated farm, neither could she tolerate the loss of identity that moving to the sort of city Ethan had in mind would mean. Within a year of the marriage she

turned peevish and sickly, then silent, just like his mother. Her sole pleasure, as Ethan sees it, is to make him miserable.

It is Zeena who suggests that her cousin Mattie Silver come to live with them as her aid. But once the attraction between Ethan and Mattie becomes apparent, Zeena begins to find fault with the girl. Zeena is hard to figure, in fact; she appears hardly human. As Mrs. Ned Hale remarks, no one knows her thoughts. To Ethan, her silence seems "deliberately assumed to conceal far-reaching intentions, mysterious conclusions drawn from suspicions and resentments impossible to guess." Indeed, Zeena arranges both Mattie's departure and her replacement without consulting Ethan. The only emotional outburst Zeena gives into happens when she discovers the broken pickle dish and breaks into sobs. But once she has prevailed in her decision to be rid of Mattie, she reverts to her selfabsorption. When Ethan comes into the house to take Mattie to the station, he finds Zeena with her head wrapped in her shawl, "reading a book called 'Kidney Troubles and Their Cure.'" After the accident, Zeena has both Ethan and Mattie brought back to the farm. In what many critics cite as a supreme irony of the story, Zeena ends up having to take care of her rival.

Harmon Gow: The narrator of the story calls Harmon Gow the "village oracle." He drove the stage from Bettsbridge to Starkfield in pre-trolley days, and knows the history of all the families along his route. It is from Gow that the narrator first begins to piece together the enigma of Ethan Frome.

Andrew Hale: Andrew is a builder, Ned Hale's father, and an old friend of Ethan's family. To avoid having to drive Zeena to the Flats, Ethan pleads that he has to collect cash for lumber from Hale. The lie forces him to go to see Hale and ask for an advance, which "the builder refused genially, as he did everything else." In a desperate attempt to procure money so he can run away with Mattie, Ethan considers approaching Hale a second time. But he cannot bring himself to deceive Hale and his wife, "two kindly people who had pitied him."

Mrs. Andrew Hale - Ned's mother and Andrew's wife, Mrs. Hale extends an unexpected degree of warmth to Ethan after encountering him by chance one winter afternoon. Her kindness and praise for his dedication to Zeena lead Ethan to reevaluate his decision to borrow money from Andrew Hale to elope with Mattie.

Ned Hale - Ruth Varnum's fiancé and later her husband. Ned and Ruth's romance contrasts with the fruitless love of Ethan and Mattie. Ned has died by the time the narrator comes to Starkfield.

Mrs. Ned Hale: Ruth is Andrew Hale's daughter-in-law. She is a middle-aged widow with whom the narrator stays while he is in Starkfield. Twenty-four years earlier, she had been a friend of Mattie Silver's, and Mattie was to have been her bridesmaid. Like Harmon Gow, Mrs. Ned Hale helps the narrator to piece together the story. Normally voluble, on the subject of Ethan Frome the narrator finds her "unexpectedly reticent." However, she is a kindly soul who looks in on the Frome household twice a year, "when Ethan's off somewheres. It's bad enough to see the two women sitting there — but his face, when he looks round that bare place, just kills me."

Narrator: The entire story of Ethan Frome is told from the point of view of an unnamed narrator. Sent to the area in connection with an engineering project at Corbury Junction, he is obliged to stay most of the winter in Starkfield on account of unexpected delays. When he encounters Ethan Frome at the post office, he is so intrigued by this "ruin of man" that he begins to ask around and eventually "[has] the story, bit by bit, from various people." The narrator feels sympathy for Ethan, and tends to think of him in heroic terms, as when he is driving in the buggy with him and sees Ethan's "brown seamed profile, under the helmet-like peak of the cap, relieved against the banks of snow like the bronze image of a hero." An indication of the extent of the narrator's fantasizing is that when Harmon Gow remarks that "Most of the smart ones get away," the narrator wonders how "any combination of obstacles [could] have hindered the flight of a man like Ethan Frome." But a single winter in the mountains is sufficient for the narrator to begin to imagine what "life there — or rather its negation — must have been in Ethan Frome's young manhood." And when a blizzard forces the narrator to take shelter at Ethan's farmhouse for the night, he finds "the clue to Ethan Frome, and [begins] to put together this vision of the story." The narrator's use of the word "vision" here is significant. According to critic Cynthia Griffin Wolff, "the 'story' of Ethan Frome is nothing more than a dream vision. The overriding question becomes then — not who is Ethan Frome, but who in the world is this ghastly guide to whom we must submit as we read the tale."

Some critics make the point that in this kind of storytelling, there is inevitably a confusion of sensibilities. Indeed, Wolff perceives the questions the narrator asks the locals about Ethan Frome "projections of his own morbid imagination." His romanticism, most evident in his associating Mattie with delicate things in nature such as field mice and small birds, and Zeena with predators such as cats and owls, lessen the credibility of his account. Ultimately, wrote Allen F. Stein, it is possible to conclude that *Ethan Frome* "is irresolvably ambiguous."

Jotham Powell: The Fromes's hired man.

Mattie Silver: Mattie Silver is a beautiful young relative of Zeena Frome's who is sent to provide help for Zeena after her father dies, leaving her penniless. She is ill-prepared to seek economic independence, and in the past, attempts at stenography and book-keeping threatened her health. As the story opens, Mattie has been with the Fromes for a year. When Ethan first goes to meet her, he thinks, "She don't look much on housework, but she ain't a fretter, anyhow." Mattie is "quick to learn, but forgetful and dreamy," and her friendship with Ethan evolves from their shared laughter at her initial efforts. Mattie's sweetness is contrasted with Zeena's sourness, and her strength with Ethan's helplessness. For example, the first time Ethan proposes that they go sledding and asks her whether she would be afraid, Mattie responds, "I told you I ain't the kind to be afraid." When Zeena confronts Ethan and Mattie with the broken pickle dish, and Ethan tries to cover for her, Mattie says, "It wasn't Ethan's fault, Zeena! The cat did break the dish; but I got it down from the china-closet, and I'm the one to blame for its getting broken." Mattie is self-possessed as Ethan takes her to the train to leave Starkfield, Although she has no idea where she is going. "You mustn't think but what I'll do all right," she comforts him. The suicide attempt is Mattie's idea, and when Ethan changes places with her on the sled at the last minute "because I want to feel you holding me," she agrees. Critics cite as one of several ironies in the novel the fact that after the accident, Mattie turns as querulous as Zeena.

Postmaster